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978-0-521-42279-6 - Schubert: Die schöne Müllerin

Susan Youens

Excerpt

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I

The poet of 'Die schöne Müllerin'

It was a fateful encounter for the world of music when Franz Schubert first discovered the poetry of the young Prussian writer Wilhelm Müller (1794–1827), but we do not know when, where, or how. One of Schubert's friends from his schooldays at the Vienna Convikt, Benedikt Randhartinger (1802–93), claimed in later life to have witnessed the discovery and told several versions of his charming but inaccurate tale to Heinrich Kreissle von Hellborn, the composer's first biographer, and others. In the Kreissle version, Schubert at some unspecified time visited Randhartinger at the home of Louis, Count Széchényi of Sárvár-Felső-Vidék, for whom Randhartinger worked as a private secretary. When the Count called his secretary, Schubert, left to his own devices, found a poetic anthology massively entitled *Seventy-Seven Poems from the Posthumous Papers of a Wandering Horn-Player* by Müller on his friend's desk and took it away, without waiting for Randhartinger to return. When Randhartinger sought him out the next day in order to retrieve his missing book, Schubert begged his pardon and then showed his astonished friend the beginning of the cycle, already composed overnight.¹ However, Randhartinger, increasingly prone in old age to embellish his Schubert anecdotes, did not become secretary to Count Széchényi until 1825, that is, *after* the publication of Schubert's setting of *Die schöne Müllerin* in 1824. In other versions, Schubert visited his friend at Randhartinger's home in the Herrengasse, not at Count Széchényi's, and the number of poems set to music overnight varied from three to seven (*Memoirs*, 200).² Although there is no concrete evidence for the supposition, it is also possible that Carl Maria von Weber, to whom Müller dedicated his second anthology of *Waldhornisten* poems in 1824,³ might have been the intermediary who introduced Schubert to Müller's works, as yet unknown to the Viennese literati, in 1823. Weber came to know Schubert during his visit to Vienna from 17 February to 20 March 1822 and, according to a letter now lost, praised the younger composer's opera *Alfonso und Estrella*, D. 732, warmly.

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Who was the poet whose verse so impressed Schubert and many other composers? Many present-day musicians hold the 'simple and naive' Müller in contempt, but literary scholars and a few dissenters from the musical realm have felt otherwise, justifiably so. Müller is neither simple nor naive: he subverts Romantic themes in sophisticated ways, and he adapted the forms of folk poetry to un-folk-like uses. He was famous in his own day and throughout much of the nineteenth century as the 'Greek Müller', one of the foremost German philhellenes who supported the cause of Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire. The young Heinrich Heine wrote to Müller to thank him for demonstrating how a poet could put new wine in the old bottles of folksong forms,⁴ and an enthusiastic American proponent of the German poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, praised 'Wohin?' in *Hyperion: A Romance* as typical of Müller's 'pretty songs, in which the momentary, indefinite longings and impulses of the soul of man find expression'.⁵ Dated words for dated verse, Müller's detractors might say, but close reading of some – not all – of his verse reveals poetry of a higher order than the legend of 'Müller's mediocrity redeemed by great music' would allow.

The myth of Schubert's supposed lack of literary sensibility has been thoroughly refuted by now. Whether a poem elicited musical ideas was the primary criterion, of course, and he had no qualms about editing poetry for conversion into musical form, but his choices of poetry-for-music reveal a generally discriminating taste. He would on occasion dismiss poetry in blunt terms ('This poem has nothing of music in it', he once told Johann Gabriel Seidl, although he *did* set eleven other poems by Seidl), and he had decided tastes in the matter. The singer to whom Schubert dedicated *Die schöne Müllerin*, Karl Freiherr von Schönstein (1791–1876), writes in his reminiscences of Schubert that the poet Joseph Freiherr von Zedlitz wanted Schubert to set his ballad 'Die nächtliche Heerschau', but the composer refused, 'as he felt he was not in a position to write good music to this poem' (*Memoirs*, 104).⁶ In light of those who still condemn Müller as a writer of simple pseudo-folksongs, it is interesting to observe that Schubert had little interest in folk or even folk-like poetry. He must have known the famous anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*, yet neither it, nor any poetry by Clemens Brentano, Achim von Arnim (the compilers and writers of *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*), or Joseph von Eichendorff, appear in his list of texts. He did, however, adopt Müller wholeheartedly.

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The poet and his works

Johann Ludwig Wilhelm Müller was born on 15 October 1794 in Dessau, then a provincial town on the river Mulde north of Leipzig.⁷ The only surviving child of a poor tailor, Müller's studies in philology, history, and literature at Berlin University in 1812–13 were sponsored by Duke Leopold Friedrich of Anhalt-Dessau, who later gave Müller the post of ducal librarian in 1820 and appointed him *Hofrat* (privy councillor) in 1824. His studies were interrupted after one year by the War of Liberation in 1813, in which Müller fought in the battles of Lützen and at Haynau and Kulm. After his return to Berlin in late 1814, his talent and charm gained him entrée to the city's literary salons, where he met such notable Romantic writers as Friedrich Baron de la Motte Fouqué, Clemens Brentano, and Achim von Arnim. In 1817, his professors, decrying the restless young man's lack of concentration on a single field of study, recommended that he accompany one Baron von Sack on a journey through Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt. The pair spent two months in Vienna before travelling to Italy, and it was there that Müller's ardent philhellenism was born. It is intriguing to speculate that he might have encountered Schubert during those two months, but there is no evidence for such an occurrence. Although Müller would have preferred a post in Dresden, Berlin, or Leipzig, he settled in his home town after his return from Rome in December 1818 and there began a career as a librarian, teacher, editor, translator, critic, and poet. Despite his constant restlessness (*Wanderlust* is a major theme of his life and his verse), he was happily married from 1821 on to Adelheid von Basedow (1800–83). His good fortune did not last long: he died unexpectedly during the night of 30 September/1 October 1827, just as Schubert was completing the composition of *Winterreise*, D. 911.

Müller's works reflect the interests of many German intellectuals and poets of his day: translations and studies of medieval German literature, folk poetry, novellas, Italian travel lore, Homeric studies, philhellenic poems, and critiques of contemporary English and German poetry – an impressive catalogue for so short a life. Most of Müller's lyric verse was published in the two companion volumes of *Gedichte aus den hinterlassenen Papieren eines reisenden Waldhornisten* (1820 and 1824). The elaborate title is a compendium of Romantic linguistic emblems, even though many of the poems part company with the spirit of Romanticism: wandering, music, horn-calls, humble folk (the *Waldhornist* represents the common people), relics from the past, death, even magic numbers (the 'seventy-seven' poems in the first anthology). The poetry in both collections is grouped in

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sets and cycles, mostly non-narrative. Both *Die schöne Müllerin* and *Die Winterreise* are exceptions to his usual practice, best exemplified by the lovely cycle *Frühlingskranz aus dem Plauenschen Grunde bei Dresden*, with its unifying theme of spring conquering winter, from the *Waldhornisten-Gedichte II*. The poetic personae of the two anthologies are largely conventional characters from the standard repertoire of shepherds, harvesters, fishermen, apprentices, sailors, maidens in love, millers, hunters, night watchmen, drinkers galore, and, above all, the wanderers endemic in early-nineteenth-century verse, travellers both blessed and cursed, on quests of many kinds.

The gregarious Müller wrote numerous drinking songs, grouped together in the *Tafellieder für Liedertafeln* (Drinking songs for choral societies) printed in the *Waldhornisten-Gedichte II*, and epigrams spiked, like the drinking songs, with acid political commentary – titles such as ‘Bad times, good wine’ and ‘The new demagogue’ did not escape the censor’s notice. His frequent brushes with the government’s powerful censorship bureaucracy began as early as 1816, when he and five friends published a volume of poetry entitled *Die Bundesblüthen* (*Blossoms from the league*) just after the Prussian monarch had forbidden all mention of ‘secret societies’ in print. Müller, however, was no martyr for his beliefs and, despite bitter complaints to his friend and publisher Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus, often complied with the censors’ strictures. *Die schöne Müllerin* (*Im Winter zu lesen*) or *The beautiful miller’s daughter* (*To read in wintertime*) would have given government bureaucrats no cause for alarm, but not all of his works were so politically innocuous.

The genesis of the poetic cycle

The history of *Die schöne Müllerin* begins with events in late 1816 – early 1817 and culminates, after Müller’s travels in Italy, in the completion of the cycle in 1819–20. Müller became part of a circle of friends who met at the Bauhofstrasse home of the privy councillor Friedrich August von Stägemann (1763–1840), an amateur poet interested in old German traditions. Friedrich August’s wife Elisabeth, an accomplished amateur singer and actress and, like her husband, a published poet, brought together a group of brilliant young literary talents for the sake of her son August and her sixteen-year-old daughter Hedwig (1799–1891), the original ‘beautiful miller maid’.⁸ The younger *Deutsche Gesellschaft* (the Stägemanns also hosted a circle of older artists, E. T. A. Hoffmann and Achim von Arnim among them) included Müller, then twenty-three; the twenty-two-year-old

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Wilhelm Hensel (1794–1861), who became a noted portrait artist and Fanny Mendelssohn's husband; his eighteen-year-old sister Luise Hensel (1798–1876), a gifted poet whose children's prayer 'Müde bin ich, geh zur Ruh' (I am weary and go to sleep) is still anthologized in collections of nineteenth-century verse; and the publisher Friedrich Förster (1791–1868), among others. These were the principal players in the poetic tourney that probably began in November of 1816, a game with marked biographical subcurrents. Müller was in love with Luise Hensel, a complex personality whose inner conflicts between *eros* and *caritas* led eventually to her renunciation of marriage and a life devoted to religious charities. Müller's diary for 1815–16 is largely dominated by his love for this young woman. The entry for 8 November 1815 is typical:

Whatever I have done, thought, felt, spoken, or created that is good and beautiful, I have created, spoken, and felt through you. Whatever evil and hateful remains is left over from the time of sensuality and freethinking that held me too long in its chains. Luise, my thanks to you are too great to express: you have saved my soul, my immortal soul. I have you to thank for eternal blessedness – you alone – also perhaps for transitory earthly blessedness as well.

He then re-reads the heated effusion critically and finds it incomprehensible, excessive, and full of clichés but refuses to alter what he has written because his emotion is too great for artistic constraint – a precursor of the miller in 'Pause', who says, 'I cannot sing any more; my heart is too full; I do not know how I can force it into rhyme.' One day, he wrote the question 'Luise, do you love me?' and the words 'Yes' and 'No' on pieces of paper and was playing with them; at first, the answer was 'Yes', but an unlucky rearrangement produced a conjunction of Yes and No: 'Ja, nein Wilhelm' (Yes, [but] not Wilhelm).⁹ In this touchingly youthful anecdote is possibly the origin of 'Der Neugierige' and a world that shrinks to the boundaries of two single words. Müller's diary breaks off just before Christmas 1816. Clemens Brentano had met Luise at the Stägemann's house in October, had fallen violently in love with her, and proposed marriage that Christmas. With the advent of the older poet's stormy (and ultimately unsuccessful) suit, Müller's dreams of marrying Luise ended, and so does the diary.

The *Liederspiel*, or a narrative play in verse and song (a cross between a *Singspiel* and a song cycle invented by Johann Friedrich Reichardt as an attempt to reform the *Singspiel*), was a genre performed by professional theatrical companies and by *Liederkreis* societies and artistic salons in the early nineteenth century.¹⁰ For their *Liederspiel*, the young poets of the Stägemann circle chose the venerable tale of a miller maid wooed by

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various suitors, a subject with numerous models in literature and music. Giovanni Paisiello's comic opera *L'amor contrastato, o sia La bella molinara* of 1788 with its famous air 'Nel cor più non mi sento', had been very popular in Germany and Austria in various German translations, some entitled *Die schöne Müllerin*; it was performed in Vienna in 1822, and Schubert could possibly have heard it the year before he composed his song cycle to a different version of the miller maid's multiple suitors. Another important source for the *Liederspiel* was Goethe's set of four miller-ballads – 'Edelknappe und Müllerin' (The young lord and the miller maid), 'Junggeselle und Mühlbach' (The young journeyman apprentice and the mill-stream), 'Der Müllerin Verrat' (The miller maid's betrayal), and 'Der Müllerin Reue' (The miller maid's remorse) – with their talking brook, journeyman, miller maid, and young aristocrat as the lyric protagonists. 'Junggeselle und Mühlbach' in particular seems to have inspired Müller's creation of a brook-confidante for his miller; Goethe's journeyman miller who bids the brook 'Geh', sag ihr gleich und sag ihr oft' was clearly the model for Müller's 'Eifersucht und Stolz', in which his miller tells the brook 'Geh', Bächlein, hin und sag ihr das'. Given the musical talents of several members of the group, they would probably also have known Reichardt's settings of Goethe's mill poems.¹¹

Other sources for the *Liederspiel* came from folk poetry and the various imitations of folk idioms by learned poets. Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano's anthology *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* includes a poem entitled 'Der Überlaufer' (The Deserter) in which a maiden named Rose abandons the poetic speaker for a huntsman:

(3rd and final stanza)

Hört ihr nicht den Jäger blasen
In dem Wald auf grünem Rasen,
Den Jäger mit dem grünen Hut,
Der mein' Schatz verführen tut?¹²

Do you not hear the huntsman blowing
his horn in the green forest,
the hunter with the green hat
who seduced my sweetheart?

Joseph von Eichendorff's 'In einem kühlen Grunde' (There stands a mill-wheel in a cool riverbank); Clemens Brentano's 'Der Rhein und seine Nebenflüsse' (The Rhine and its tributaries), in which the river Lohre announces 'Von dem Müllerburschen sing ich, / Der sein treue Lieb verlor' (I sing of the miller lad who lost his true love); and Justinus Kerner's eccentric first novel, *Reiseschatten von dem Schattenspieler Luchs* of 1811, with its shy, poetically inclined miller lad outdone by a bold hunter, are other predecessors that the group might have known.¹³ Müller, prone to using borrowed themes as springboards for his own imagination, took

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motifs from Eichendorff for several of his own poems, including 'Der Jäger' in *Die schöne Müllerin* (see ch. 4, p. 56) and 'Die Post' from *Die Winterreise* (the wanderer in that cycle hears a posthorn and his heart leaps, like Eichendorff's poetic persona in 'Sehnsucht' or 'Longing'). The poet Friedrich Rückert, a friend of Müller's in Italy, had written a poem on the miller-maid theme, 'Die Mühle wogt wohl Tag und Nacht' (The mill works both day and night) for his *Jugendlieder* of 1810–13, later published in the *Liebesfrühling*; Müller may have borrowed the motif of frenetic activity to impress the maiden from Rückert's second stanza and improved upon it for his poem 'Am Feierabend'.¹⁴

For their *Liederspiel* 'Rose, die Müllerin', the Stägemann company assigned roles as follows: Hedwig was Rose the miller maid, and her suitors were Friedrich Förster as a *Junker* or country squire; Müller, predestined by his name, as the journeyman miller; Wilhelm Hensel as the hunter; and Luise Hensel as a gardener. There were other minor roles, possibly including a fisherman, but none of those poems is extant, and the chroniclers cite only the principal parts and players. We know from one of Brentano's letters of December 1816 (he was, speculatively, involved in the venture as a literary advisor) that the *Liederspiel* was acted with whatever gestures and vocal inflections the amateur actors considered appropriate.¹⁵ The play that emerged from their improvisatory efforts has the young miller prevailing briefly over the other suitors – this is not so in the later cycle – and then committing suicide when Rose spurns him for the hunter. Furthermore, in the Stägemann play, the miller is only one of the roles, not the sole story-teller, and the tale continues beyond the point where the later song cycles end. The miller maid, overcome by remorse, subsequently throws herself into the brook as well, after which the others sing songs of mourning for her.¹⁶

The first song cycle and early versions of the poetry

Some time in November or early December 1816, the group asked Luise to bring her music teacher, the thirty-eight-year-old virtuoso pianist and composer Ludwig Berger (1777–1839), to the house for a performance. Berger, who was also in love with Luise Hensel and proposed marriage to her in February 1817 (?), liked the playlet; according to the poet and music critic Ludwig Rellstab (1799–1860), who published a biography of his deceased friend in 1846, Berger first set Hedwig von Stägemann's 'Wies Vöglein möcht ich ziehen' with its refrain 'Ich habe das Grün so gern' to music.¹⁷ When Berger's setting met with the group's approval, he agreed to

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set some of the other poems as a song cycle. In Müller's diary for 14 December 1816, Müller writes that he had gone to visit the Hensels and had stayed with Luise 'until seven o'clock, when I went to see Berger, who had requested our presence [Wilhelm Hensel and Müller] for the evening'; one can therefore infer that Berger was already at work on the cycle before Christmas 1816.¹⁸ Five of the poems he chose were Müller's and the young poet was his principal collaborator. Rellstab relates that the composer worked slowly and painfully and that he (Rellstab) was a witness to Berger torturing Müller with demands for revision. The poet supposedly complied gladly, seeing the beautiful musical results. One wonders if Müller was really so amenable, although he could well have been deferring to a musical talent he respected – the virtuoso pianist and well-known composer was far more eminent than the young poet at the time. The collaboration ended when Müller left for Italy in August, and Berger's ten songs were published the following year by the newly-founded firm of E. H. G. Christiani as the *Gesänge aus einem gesellschaftlichen Liederspiele 'Die schöne Müllerin'*, Op. 11. These songs offer a unique glimpse into the world of private salons and the genesis of an emerging art form: the set is a remarkable link between staged dramatic works (these are songs *from* a *Liederspiel*, not a *Liederspiel* itself) and concert lieder cycles, such as Schubert's.

Berger's five Müller settings in his *Die schöne Müllerin* cycle also preserve earlier versions of those poems by a poet given to revision, whatever his occasional assertion of spontaneous inspiration. In his diary, he wrote that 'I often carry a song about with me for a long time; I finish and refine it within, then write it down quickly and without alteration. These are my best pieces.'¹⁹ However, in 1827, he told the Leipzig publisher Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus, 'I am very scrupulous about style and count syllables anxiously',²⁰ and the habit of tinkering with his poems was evident early. With each stage of publication, he revised and refined the poems born of the Stägemann *Liederspiel*. The variants in Berger's cycle might well reflect, so we are told, the composer's wishes; the same poems appear in contemporary literary periodicals with details altered from the texts of the Berlin composer's cycle. In the list of Berger's Müller settings below, the initial number is that of the song's order in the set of ten.

1. Des Müllers Wanderlied. ('Ich hört' ein Bächlein rauschen', later entitled 'Wohin?');
2. Müllers Blumen. (later entitled 'Des Müllers Blumen');
7. Der Müller. ('Ich möchte ziehn in die Welt hinaus', later entitled 'Die böse Farbe');

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9. Müllers trockne Blumen. (later entitled 'Trock'ne Blumen');
 10. Des Baches Lied. (later entitled 'Des Baches Wiegenlied')

Berger's cycle thus begins, not with 'Das Wandern' but with the earliest published version of 'Wohin?', lacking the later third verse.

Early versions of the six other poems from *Die schöne Müllerin* were also published in *Der Gesellschafter* within the week from 30 May to 6 June. 'Der Neugierige' and 'Mein!' appeared in the edition for 30 May 1818, the latter very unlike its later incarnation:

Das schönste Lied (The most beautiful song)

Bächlein, laß dein Rauschen, Räder, steht nur still!	Little brook, stop your babbling! Mill-wheels, stand still!
Kommt heran zu lauschen, Wer das schönste Liedchen hören will!	Come here and listen, whoever wishes to hear the most beautiful little song of all!
Still, ihr Nachtigallen Lerchen, Finken, still! Laß ein eitel Schallen	Be quiet, nightingales! Larks and finches, cease your singing! Leave off your vain efforts to make music,
Wer das schönste Liedchen hören will!	whoever would hear the most beautiful little song of all!
Sonne, gib herunter Deinen hellsten Schein; Frühling, strahle bunter: Die geliebte Müllerin ist mein!	Sun, give forth your most brilliant rays; Springtime, shine merrily: The beloved miller maid is mine!

The latter version unfurls to greater lengths, its ecstasy less terse, and the awkward refrain of the earlier version is eliminated. Most important of all the revisions to this poem, the ending is altered and considerably deepened.

The completed cycle

Müller's pre-Italian cycle of 1817 consisted of the following poems, listed here in the chronological order of the narrative – he did not publish the work as a full-fledged narrative until the *Waldhornisten-Gedichte*.

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|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Wanderschaft | 9. Eifersucht und Stolz |
| 2. Wohin? | 10. Erster Schmerz, letzter Scherz |
| 3. Der Neugierige | 11. Die liebe Farbe |
| 4. Des Müllers Blumen | 12. Die böse Farbe |
| 5. Am Feierabend | 13. Trock'ne Blumen |
| 6. Mein | 14. Der Müller und der Bach |
| 7. Ein ungerichtetes Lied | 15. Des Baches Wiegenlied |
| 8. Der Jäger | |

At some unknown time after his return to Dessau, perhaps in spring or early summer 1820, Müller added the following ten poems: 'Der Dichter als Prolog', 'Halt!', 'Danksagung an den Bach', 'Das Mühlenleben', 'Unge-duld', 'Morgengruß', 'Pause', 'Mit dem grünen Lautenbande', 'Blümlein Vergißmei-n', and 'Der Dichter als Epilog'. With the cycle completed, Müller read the finished work in July 1820 to a small group of friends that included the great Romantic writer Ludwig Tieck, Müller's friend and supporter.²¹ Tieck did not like the tragic ending, but he found the rest praiseworthy and encouraged Müller to publish the work. The *Waldhor-nisten-Gedichte I* subsequently sold well and, with some exceptions, was favourably reviewed, although one critic rightly points out the uneven quality of the poems – 'Reduce the book by half', he said, 'and its acclaim would be greater', a judgement in which modern readers have concurred. Despite such caveats from certain critics, the book sold well. Müller published a second edition in 1826 and dedicated it to Tieck, in gratitude for his support.

Müller conceived much of his verse as poetry for music, and he was especially pleased when composers set his poems to music. Shortly after his twenty-first birthday in 1815, he wrote an imaginary address to E. T. A. Hoffmann's fictional Kapellmeister Kreisler in his diary:

I can neither play nor sing, yet when I write verses, I sing and play after all. If I could produce the melodies, my songs would be more pleasing than they are now. But courage! perhaps there is a kindred spirit somewhere who will hear the tunes behind the words and give them back to me.²²

When the composer Bernhard Josef Klein (1793–1832) published his settings of six poems by Müller in 1822, including a setting of 'Trock'ne Blumen' extracted from the complete cycle, the poet wrote in a letter of thanks, 'For indeed my songs lead but half a life, a paper existence of black-and-white, until music breathes life into them, or at least calls it forth and awakens it if it is already dormant in them.'²³ Other composers found